

VZCZCXRO1659

PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSL RUEHSR
DE RUEHYE #0803/01 3221718
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 181718Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9746
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 YEREVAN 000803

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/18/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV TU RU AJ AM

SUBJECT: TURKEY-ARMENIA END GAME: GETTING TO 'YES'

REF: A. YEREVAN 662

1B. BAKU 776

1C. YEREVAN 772

1D. YEREVAN 789

1E. YEREVAN 759

Classified By: AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) After the signing of the protocols, the Turkey-Armenia normalization process seems to be at an impasse, with both countries trapped by their own narrow conception of the issues: Turkey's demand for "progress" on NK that Armenia is unable to deliver, and Armenia's insistence that there is no linkage between the two processes. Boxed in by these constraints, we may want to consider a game-changer. Here we offer one possible approach that is being discussed in think tank circles in Yerevan. There are a number of obvious obstacles to this idea, but we offer it as a way to spur discussion that could expand our range of policy options.

12. (C) First, we could make the strong case to the Turks that opening the border should not be contingent on progress in NK, but rather that normalization itself may open new opportunities for a negotiated settlement, altering the underlying dynamic of negotiations and inducing greater flexibility on both sides. To close the deal, we could make a contingent U.S. offer (pending normalization) to support Turkey's future role as Co-Chair in a reconfigured Minsk Group, with Nagorno-Karabakh rejoining as a party to negotiations at the same time, both for balance and the inherent advantages of giving Karabakhis a voice in shaping any settlement. Even Sargsian may recognize the value in such an arrangement, or at least the short-term gains in signaling to the Turks his conditional support for the concept; doing so just might give the Turkish leadership the added incentive it needs to fully press for ratification of the normalization protocols. END SUMMARY

13. (C) Turkey-Armenia rapprochement has come farther and faster than many here thought possible. With two rounds of "football diplomacy" and two signed protocols on normalization of relations in the bag, political observers now focus on what actions, whether on the part of the GOAM, Turkey, or the international community, will be necessary to guide the process to conclusion. We asked leading analysts and officials for their take on how President Sargsian sees the way ahead, how he assesses Turkish and Azerbaijani tactics and interests, and what steps he (or others) should take to maximize the prospects for success. (Note: We have not raised the possibility of changing the composition of the Minsk Group with Armenian officials, aside from listening to their speculation about Turkish interests.)

SARGSIAN AT THE END OF HIS ROPE

¶4. (C) The clear consensus among our interlocutors was that Sargsian is all out of bold moves. Robert Simmons, NATO SYG Representative who met with Sargsian on November 6, described the President as "fatalistic" about the normalization process. Sargsian told Simmons, "We've done all we can -- now we wait." Others concurred with the notion that Sargsian had come up against the limits of his capacity for risk-taking, having been pilloried at home and abroad for steps his predecessors did not dare take. Stepan Grigorian, Chairman of the Analytical Center on Globalization and Regional Cooperation, suggested that Sargsian's early-October Diaspora tour of five cities and three continents "broke his spirit a little." In the wake of that week of withering criticism, Sargsian had become very cautious. "For a poor country like Armenia, its Diaspora is very powerful, its influence tangible," Grigorian explained. "He has done a wonderful job on Turkey-Armenia, but now he can't find the guts for any final push," he said.

¶5. (C) Quick Armenian ratification of the normalization protocols to put pressure on the Turks is one such move for which Sargsian just does not have the stomach, we heard. "From a rational point of view, of course it would be right for Armenia to quickly ratify," Tigran Mkrtchian, Executive Director of the Armenian International Policy Research Group, told us, "but from the Armenian point of view, it would be a dangerous threat to dignity" if after ratification, the Turks did not follow suit. Reuben Safrastian, Director of the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Oriental Studies, agreed, saying Sargsian would not be able to swallow his pride, check his "eastern machismo," and appear to be "genuflecting" before the Turks by ratifying first. In his

YEREVAN 00000803 002 OF 005

October 20 meeting with EUR DAS Kaidanow, Sargsian unequivocally rejected the notion, calling it "impossible." (ref E)

CONCESSIONS ON NK UNREALISTIC (FOR NOW)

¶6. (C) Sargsian will be more cautious still on the question of delivering the "progress" Turkish parliamentarians say they need on Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) to give them the political cover for ratification. Safrastian, one of Armenia's preeminent Turkologists, told us he has personally advised Sargsian that the Turks only need something symbolic. "The Turks are pragmatic -- they understand that if Armenia hasn't given land back in 17 years, it won't happen in the next few months either," he said. Something like the November 2008 Meiendorf declaration, Safrastian thought, with vague commitments to a negotiated settlement, could be sufficient. Karen Bekarian, Chairman of European Integration NGO, suggested Sargsian should also make a carefully worded statement noting that being on the verge of a breakthrough with the Turks, Armenia's historical enemy, gave him hope for a peaceful future with Armenia's former Soviet brothers -- a signal that normalization with Turkey could change the dynamic on NK for the better, actually improving the prospects for peace rather than making Sargsian uninterested in further negotiation, as the Azerbaijanis fear.

¶7. (C) Beyond such symbolic gestures, however, our interlocutors believed Sargsian has no room for maneuver. If there is any hint of an Armenian concession on NK as a price for normalization, even progressive elements within Armenia and the Diaspora that have heretofore fully supported rapprochement would turn against it, we heard. "Society thinks the protocols already embody concessions," giving the Turks what they want on the historical sub-commission on the "genocide," and recognition of borders, Bekarian explained. Ratification of the protocols in the Armenian National Assembly will be a given, he added, but not if Sargsian is perceived as having given ground on NK to secure the Turkish vote.

CONFLICTING INCENTIVES MAKE EVEN SYMBOLIC GAINS ELUSIVE

¶18. (C) Within the Minsk Group context, most of our contacts could not imagine Sargsian and Azerbaijani President Aliyev agreeing to anything in the near term. Their interests are diametrically opposed, we heard: Sargsian can only assent to something symbolic that cannot possibly be construed as a concession; Aliyev must deny Sargsian precisely what he needs -- the appearance of progress without real compromise. Given that Azerbaijani strategy is founded upon the continued isolation of Armenia, "It would be contrary to Aliyev's interests to give Turkish parliamentarians political cover," Mkrtchian told us, adding, "Azerbaijan won't sign what Armenia would, and vice versa." Penned in by this logic, Mkrtchian and others concluded that pursuing any "progress" that required Azerbaijani assent was simply a dead-end.

¶19. (C) Despite these political and psychological constraints, could the prospect of the entire normalization process collapsing spur Sargsian to muster the strength for another risky move or two at the urging of the international community? Our interlocutors had their doubts, largely because Sargsian seems to believe that even in failure he would get credit from the U.S. and the EU for trying. "Even if the process falls short, it will have enhanced Armenia's standing with the international community," Alexander Iskandarian, Director of the Caucasus Institute, told us. So long as the blame for failure lands squarely on the Turks -- and the Armenians are already preemptively spinning that interpretation (ref D) -- the downside is not sufficiently compelling to entice Sargsian out of his foxhole.

ARMENIA PINS HOPES ON US/EU PRESSURE ON TURKEY

¶10. (C) "Armenia's whole strategy right now is to wait for the U.S. and EU to pressure Turkey to ratify," Mkrtchian and others told us. Somewhat surprisingly, in discussing the most promising thrust for that pressure, our interlocutors did not focus on a U.S. threat of "genocide" recognition. "It is of course a huge issue for the Turks," Grigorian said, "but it shouldn't be deployed as a primitive bargaining chip." Mkrtchian agreed, suggesting that President Obama's message to Turkish PM Erdogan on December 7 should at most note that, should Erdogan step back and allow his party members to vote their conscience on ratification of the protocols (instead of enforcing party discipline), that he

YEREVAN 00000803 003 OF 005

would invite the U.S. Congress to do the same, without interference from the executive branch, on recognition.

EXPLOITING GAPS BETWEEN TURKEY AND AZERBAIJAN

¶11. (C) Rather than suggesting the U.S. engage the Turks with a reserve of carrots and sticks ready to deploy, our interlocutors focused instead on the case the U.S. should build with the GOT for how normalization serves not only Turkey's but Azerbaijan's real long-term interests. The starting point for building such a case would be a recognition of the divergence in Turkish and Azerbaijani positions on NK and in their differing assessments of the efficacy of the 17-year policy of isolating Armenia. As seen from Yerevan, though the Azerbaijani strategy is still founded upon isolating and weakening Armenia until it is subject to capitulation or military defeat, the Turks recognize that the policy has failed. Grigorian pointed to the two weekly round-trip Yerevan-Istanbul flights and four summer weekly round-trip charters to Antalya, as well as Armenian containers being welcome to transit Turkish Black Sea ports for the past two years, as evidence that Turkey had already rejected Azerbaijani blockade logic.

¶12. (C) Armenians also suspect that the Turks' notion of an

acceptable resolution on NK is closer to Armenia's than to Azerbaijan's. Mkrtchian told us Turkey understands concessions must be mutual: "Turkey wants Azerbaijan to get five of the seven occupied territories back. Armenia agrees.

But the Azeri answer to what Armenia would get in exchange remains "Nothing." They've offered nothing more than 'the highest form of autonomy' since 1994." Mkrtchian added that while Aliyev still thinks he can get everything, "There is no Turkish belief in liberating Karabakh." According to Gregorian, "Turkey can't possibly think a solution to NK won't involve Azeri concessions," noting that Russia would never allow the Azerbaijan military to take back Karabakh by force, leaving compromise (or continued stalemate) as the only option. "The Turks know that Aliyev needs to adjust his expectations," Iskandarian said.

CHANGING MINDSETS ON NK

¶13. (C) While Aliyev may be trapped in his zero-sum mind-set in which any short-term gain for Armenia is a loss for him, contacts here believed the Turks are capable of seeing the bigger picture -- how Turkey-Armenia normalization could help, not hinder progress on NK by shifting the context of the conflict and the mind-sets of the parties. For Armenia, the sense of being surrounded by hostile Turkic enemies has pushed the government into a defensive crouch, unwilling to give up an inch of territory for fear of surrendering tactical advantage, we heard. With normal relations with Turkey would come a measure of security and the confidence to consider concessions previously unimaginable. Conversely, "If normalization fails because of either Turkey or Azerbaijan, imagine how much more rigid Armenia will become," Bekarian warned.

¶14. (C) As for Azerbaijan, "The Turks need to recognize that the Azeris are rigid because they think they have unconditional Turkish support," Iskandarian said. "If the borders open, the Azeri approach would be undermined and Azerbaijan would become a more normal negotiator" -- not a selling point for the Turks to use with Aliyev, of course, but an advantage the Turks should, nonetheless, appreciate in the interest of moving beyond stalemate and averting a future war, he added.

MAKING TURKEY A MINSK GROUP CO-CHAIR?

¶15. (C) With normalized relations, regional and international perceptions of Turkey could also shift, we heard. "So long as the Turks blatantly back Azeri interests, the world will never accept Turkey as a constructive contributor to regional peace. But with reconciliation, Turkey could become a constructive force, gain a vote and voice," Bekarian said. In fact, Grigorian argued that, if (and only if) the border opens and relations are normalized, an argument could be made for Turkey to be included as a Co-Chair in a reconfigured Minsk Group. Given Turkish interest in expanding its regional leadership role, contacts suggested the notion should hold great appeal in Ankara. In fact, during a November 11 meeting, Deputy Foreign Minister Kirakossian told DCM that their conclusion at MFA was that a seat in the Minsk Group was likely what the Turks really wanted as the final sweetener for them to ratify.

YEREVAN 00000803 004 OF 005

¶16. (C) Although Kirakossian rolled his eyes at the thought, others outside the government argued that, under the right conditions, bringing Turkey into the Minsk Group fold could be acceptable to Armenia and a positive for the prospects of resolution. A precondition for becoming a co-chair would be acceptance of the three pillars of negotiations: territorial integrity, non-use of force, and self-determination of peoples. In acknowledging the applicability of the principle of self-determination (for which they have obvious sympathy

in the Cyprus context), Turkey would be acknowledging the central claim of the Karabakhis and approaching the conflict with much greater balance, Mkrtchian argued.

¶17. (C) Mkrtchian and others also believed that admitting Turkey as a Co-Chair should only happen if, at the same time, NK returns to the negotiating table as a party to the conflict. Political observers have long worried that NK's exclusion from negotiations (by former President Kocharian in 1998, when he said he, as a Karabakhi could represent their interests) meant any negotiated settlement could still be effectively vetoed by Karabakh (ref A). Samvel Nikoyan, Deputy Speaker of Parliament, argued that NK should never have been excluded, and reconfiguring the Minsk Group to include Turkey could be just the opportunity, from the Armenian perspective, to bring NK representation back (though he doubted Azerbaijan would ever accept negotiating with Karabakhis.)

TIMING MATTERS (AND THE CLOCK IS TICKING)

¶18. (C) Turkey should be open to the broad argument that normalization could change the dynamic on NK for the better, despite Azerbaijani short-term zero-sum thinking to the contrary, we heard. Observers here worry, however, that the Turks may not fully appreciate the urgency of ratifying the protocols quickly. For tactical reasons, the Turks may call for patience, believing they can extract more -- from Armenia or the U.S. -- by demonstrating a willingness to draw the process out so as to play on Sargsian's need for a breakthrough before Armenia's Day of Remembrance on April 24 (ref D). (There is no way, we heard, that Sargsian would allow anything like a replay of last year's drama, with a "genocide-deferring" joint Turkey-Armenia statement of progress on normalization coming out on April 22.) "Turkey will play upon the fact that there is no timeline included in the protocols. And if Armenia pulls out of the process, the Turks will blame us for the failure saying we weren't patient," Mkrtchian argued.

¶19. (C) The international community should urge the Turks not to risk long-term strategic gain -- a new, muscular leadership role in the region -- in pursuit of short-term tactical negotiating advantage, we heard. "Turkey needs to see that the window is open now, but won't stay open," Grigorian said. Not only is the window narrow for Armenia (ref D), but perhaps for Russia too, whose support for the process has been critical, he added. As Grigorian saw it, Russia was making a tactical decision to support normalization in order to isolate Georgia, through which most Armenian imports flow. "But that could change if Russia focuses on the long-term implications -- that Turkey's role in the region will grow with open borders while Russia's will shrink," he suggested.

¶20. (C) The U.S., EU and Russia, Mkrtchian suggested, should release a statement saying "Normalization is indispensable, should be unconditional, and should be done as quickly as possible," while using diplomatic channels to uniformly communicate a firm, early spring deadline. In establishing such unambiguous expectations, the international community could reduce the Turkish government's temptation to hold out for the best deal, only to find that the opportunity for a historic breakthrough has passed it by.

COMMENT

¶21. (C) Turkey has attempted to re-frame the normalization debate by making the issue of sufficient "progress" on NK the central question. If we and others accept that framework, normalization could be in trouble. But rather than denying the linkage between Turkey-Armenia and the NK conflict, we could acknowledge to the Turks the obvious interconnectivity, but reverse the argument: movement on NK is not a precondition for open borders, but opening borders could

fundamentally alter the dynamics of an NK negotiating process
rife with irreconcilable differences and inflexibility on

YEREVAN 00000803 005 OF 005

both sides. Ratification does not mean selling out their Turkic brethren, but cutting the knot that has long lashed both Armenia and Azerbaijan to their mutual, self-destructive trajectory.

¶22. (C) The notion of expanding the Minsk Group to include Ankara would induce apoplexy in some here (e.g. Dashnaks) and perhaps anxiety in most. It would also provide additional fodder to Sargsian's opponents in the Diaspora. But the case for inclusion presupposes a Turkey no longer fundamentally hostile to Armenia -- a Turkey with whom Armenians could negotiate, and one which could actually moderate Azerbaijani maximalism. Making Turkish participation conditional on returning Nagorno-Karabakh to negotiations could make the notion more palatable still and correct what many see as Kocharian's mistake. Any such reconfiguration would likely itself be the subject of intense, difficult, and perhaps extensive negotiation. But in the near term, we ask whether there could be value in raising the idea with the GOT, noting that the U.S. would support such a role for Turkey (with the above conditions), and that prompt ratification and implementation of the protocols without preconditions would be Turkey's first step toward the regional leadership to which it aspires.

¶23. (C) As for Sargsian, his political capital is spent. Short of a victory on ratification, one thing that would recharge his reserves would be an invitation to the White House. We won't overstate what he could deliver with that capital -- perhaps the aforementioned carefully crafted speech recommitting himself to regional peace, sufficient to give at least some Turkish parliamentarians political cover. But he also just might be persuaded to quietly signal to the Turkish leadership that he too could see the merits of a reconfigured Minsk Group with the Turks playing a role befitting their new status in an integrated region. There would be risk, but with U.S. support, and without compromising Armenian interests on Karabakh, Sargsian could warm to the idea of a reconfigured Minsk Group recognizing it just might help secure a win on his top foreign policy priority.

¶24. (C) It is also possible that Sargsian would outright reject any such notion. So too might Azerbaijan, Russia, and Karabakh-Armenians. If the Turkish leadership warmed to the idea, could it enforce party discipline on ratification without revealing that the U.S. would argue for its Minsk Group inclusion? Even presupposing an openness on all sides, numerous details would need to be carefully managed, practical obstacles identified and overcome. But given the apparent gap between Turkish expectations and the Armenian willingness and ability to deliver, it may be worth considering an approach bold enough to jolt the players out of their stale, narrow thinking.

YOVANOVITCH